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THE MIDDLE EAST: LEBANON

by

Thomas F. Folkes  
Lieutenant Colonel; USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

REQUIREMENT

Advisor: Colonel Ed Mangis

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## ABSTRACT

TITLE: The Middle East: Lebanon

AUTHOR: Thomas F. Folkes, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

The Middle East has long been a volatile region. Over the past fifty years it has forcefully demonstrated this time and again in the spotlight of world attention. It currently ranks high on America's list of problem areas in the world and its instability is viewed by many as a potentially serious threat to vital U.S. interests. American foreign policy efforts to create and maintain a lasting peace in the region have been unsuccessful largely because we failed to adequately grasp and deal with the vast differences between our respective cultures, concerns, and perspectives. Lebanon represents a microcosm of this troubled area and these differences. U.S. military and civilian policy makers need to better understand the deep-seated nature of regional disagreements, particularly as regards their impact on international relationships.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas F. Folkes (MS Psychology, Troy State University) has closely followed events in the Middle East for several years. His interests have focused primarily on cultural differences and their affect on preceptions of what constitutes rational thought. Although never assigned to the Middle East, Colonel Folkes has served three tours of duty outside the U.S. and has frequently been temporarily assigned to various foreign locations. He recently returned from a 12 day trip to three middle eastern countries where he was able to observe first hand some of the vast distinctions between cultures and nations in the region. Colonel Folkes is a graduate of the Air War College, class of 1993.

## Introduction

The Middle East has long been a volatile region. Over the past fifty years it has forcefully demonstrated this time and again in the spotlight of world attention. It currently ranks high on America's list of problem areas in the world and its instability is viewed by many as a potentially serious threat to vital U.S. interests.

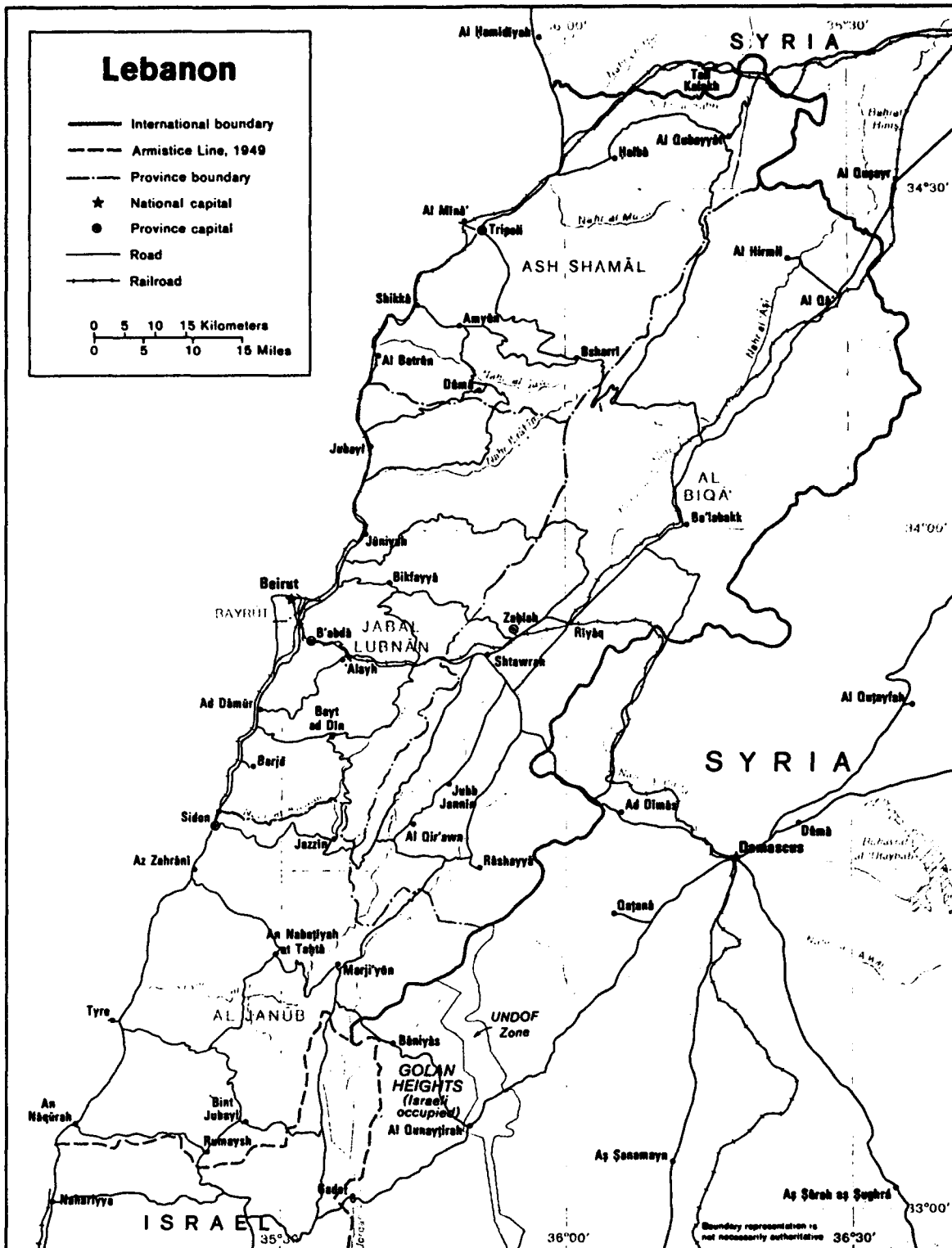
Conflicts between neighboring states in the region are very difficult to comprehend. Most Americans, probably even some of our Mid East "experts", do not understand these conflicts well enough to be able to accurately assess their impact on international relations. I don't say that to condemn, but rather to make a point: American foreign policy efforts to create and maintain a lasting peace in the Middle East have been unsuccessful primarily because of our collective failure to grasp and deal with the vast differences between cultures, concerns, and perspectives.

Few of us are aware of the current sources of conflict in the region, and fewer still can even begin to fathom the intensity of feeling surrounding the root causes of those conflicts. This paper looks at one middle eastern country, Lebanon, and provides pertinent history and geography, as well as a brief overview of some of the issues that have created or are creating regional instability.

The U.S. has been closely involved with Lebanon and her problems for decades. The Eisenhower Doctrine, U.S. policy toward the middle east in 1957, offered support for any country requesting it. The primary purpose was to block Soviet expansionism. Lebanon was the only Arab country to accept the offer, which eventually took the form of U.S. military presence during the 1958 civil war. While this stay was short-lived, American Marines returned in 1983 and faced shocking consequences when the barracks they were living in were reduced to rubble by a terrorist bomb. That incident essentially ended direct U.S. military involvement, although political and economic ties remained strong for several more years.

There are fifteen countries in what we usually think of as the Middle East. To one degree or another virtually all the problems common to the region can be found in Lebanon. It is important, therefore, that we increase our understanding of this small but strategically located country. To that end we will look specifically at the following areas:

- \* History, Population, and Demographics
- \* Religious and Ethnic Fragmentation
- \* The Issue of Water
- \* Stateless Nations
- \* Occupied Lands
- \* Haves/Have Nots
- \* Military Forces and Imbalances



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## LEBANON

### History, Population and Demographics

Connecticut is small ... Lebanon is smaller! It is slightly over 120 miles long from tip to tip and varies in width from a low of about 20 miles in the extreme south to roughly 50 miles in the north. It shares a northern and eastern border with Syria and a southern one with Israel. The Mediterranean Sea forms Lebanon's western boundary. The capital, Beirut, is located almost exactly half way up the coastline. It and other major port cities such as Tripoli, Sidon, and Tyre figured prominently in Lebanon's historical role as a crossroads for culture and trade between Arabia and the rest of the world since before the days of Christ.

In addition to its thin sliver of coastline, Lebanon consists of two north-south mountain ranges separated by the Biqa' (Bekaa) Valley. The eastern range forms part of the Lebanese-Syrian border. The climate is generally moderate with warm, humid summers and cool, damp winters. The high mountains are usually snow covered from September to April. Less than a quarter of the land is suitable for agriculture, and much of that is dedicated to citrus fruit crops. Most of the remaining land is either desert, waste, or developed into urban areas where most of the country's 3.3 million inhabitants live. Beirut and Tripoli are the largest cities

with approximately 1.1 million and 250,000 people respectively. (1:1-3) The population breakout by major religious groups has changed somewhat over the years but current estimates suggest a significant Muslim majority. Approximately 32 percent are thought to be Shi'ite, 20 percent Sunni and 5 percent Druze. Most of the remaining population is Christian (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, etc.). (7:571)

Lebanon's history is replete with accounts of invasions, conquering armies, and occupying forces. Accordingly, her national boundaries have changed frequently over time. She was part of the Roman Empire, came under Islamic control for nearly 500 years, was "reclaimed" for Christianity during the Crusades in the eleventh century, and eventually fell to Ottoman rule. (2:10) She came under Egyptian control for a few years, was considered part of "greater," or "geographical" Syria, was controlled by the French after WW 1, and finally became a British "mandate" following WW 2. She was technically granted independence in 1943 with boundaries essentially as exists today. (3:23 and 4:17-22)

Unfortunately, very few of the intervening years since independence have seen Lebanon being treated as, or for that matter acting as, an independent sovereignty. Instead, she has involuntarily served as the primary battleground for

disputes between "east" and "west", Moslem and Christian, and currently, Arab and Israeli. At the very heart of these issues in recent years has been the Palestinian homeland problem which will be discussed in more detail later.

It would not be inaccurate to describe Lebanon as "trapped." Geographically, historically, and philosophically she appears consistently caught in the middle of competing forces much larger and stronger than herself. This has led to an unusual set of problems for the central government involving religious and ethnic differences between the extremely diverse and factionalized elements of her population.

#### Religious and Ethnic Fragmentation

Before we review these issues in some detail, I think it is important for the reader to understand that the modern day Lebanese government was originally created along "confessional" lines. That is, power was to be distributed proportionally in reference to adherence to a particular faith, religion, sect, or clan. (2:263)

The confessional system was based on the philosophical differences between followers of Christian and Islamic theologies. Lebanon has been ruled by each at one time or another as both fought to spread their beliefs. A holy war

against non-Muslims brought Islam and Arab control to the area surrounding Lebanon in the seventh century. Nearly 500 years later the Crusades returned Christianity, and a delicate mixture has existed since. Essentially, this system of "compromise" government was designed to ensure fair representation for the various subgroups in the country. For many reasons this method of sharing power has never worked as planned and it has now been virtually cast aside as a failure. The difficulty trying to govern this "mixed bag" as a single entity will become evident as we turn now to look more specifically at some of the population, religious, and ethnic problems in the country.

There is an old Arab saying that goes a long way towards explaining the way things are in Lebanon: "I and my brother against my cousin, and I and my cousin against the alien." (5:138) As applies to Lebanon, the term "alien" can probably best be defined as anyone not part of one's own family, clan, or religious group. David Gordon, an author who spent many years in Lebanon says, "The Lebanese extended family is the basic unit of society." He concludes, in fact, that virtually all aspects of daily life in Lebanon are typically conducted "...along family, ethnic, and religious lines." (4:34) The depth and strength of these ties periodically lead to behaviors or actions that many Americans consider fanatical.

To understand Lebanon, one must first try to understand some of these cultural distinctions and binds. As noted above, Lebanon has been controlled or at least significantly influenced by outsiders, Arab and non-Arab alike, during much of its history. Each left an indelible mark. The effect of this diversity in background has been a national schizophrenia of sorts. Lebanon historically has been home to a very fragmented society; it remains much the same today. When one considers the failure of the "confessional" system, the high degree of voluntary segregation of 22 major religious sects, and the fact that many of these groups have been warring for centuries, he can begin to see some of what lies behind the present day problems. While such an understanding might make the overall picture a bit clearer, it also highlights the enormous complexity of the issues.

While its population is ethnically homogeneous, speaks a common language, and is overwhelmingly Arab, (2:xxii) Lebanon's long history of walking a fine line between the dramatically different Arab and western worlds has resulted in the severe fragmentation of its society. More so than many other countries, Lebanon, until very recently, has gone to great lengths to maintain a separatist foundation rather than truly strive for assimilation of its diverse peoples into an overarching national character of unity.

For centuries the people of Lebanon have thought of themselves as members of some identifiable subgroup. Simply stated: they seem to lack a national identity. Of this, an American sociologist once wrote, "...there is no public in Lebanon...there are only constituencies defined by primordial attachments and beliefs..." (6:79) It is this sectarian nature that led to the observation that today one would be hard pressed to find a single Lebanese in all of Lebanon. This characteristic is probably most apparent in divisions between the country's religious factions.

Some believe modern day Lebanon is largely a Christian, or western creation, and that internal and external pressure is necessary to prevent an overwhelming Muslim, or Arab influence. The counterpoint, of course, is that Muslims believe they have been denied their share of power, benefits, and influence. This, they say, is primarily due to Christian abuses of the "confessional" system of shared power based on pro rata representation.

The Christian controlled power structure that originally came with independence from France has steadfastly refused alteration. The Christian faction has retained the political upper hand even though major shifts in population favoring the Muslims call for institutional adjustments. (6:16) Although an "official" census has not been taken since 1932, it is widely held that Muslims have

outnumbered Christians since 1975, with the most recent unofficial tally showing the Muslims holding a 57 to 42 percent edge. (7:571) This disparity between percent of population and control has been a root cause of instability in the country.

Continuing problems with the perception of unfair representation resulted in a civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990. After fifteen years of bloody fighting that killed 150,000 people and forced some 800,000 away from their homes in search of safety (8:1992-3 and 1991-14), a fragile peace was established. Only recently has the representation issue been looked at seriously with an eye toward resolution. Until real changes are made, however, religious differences and their relationship to power and the distribution of resources will remain major sources of internal strife in Lebanon.

#### The Issue of Water

Water is a problem throughout the arid middle east: there are relatively few rivers and most of those flow across national boundaries between often unfriendly countries. The availability, quality, and usage of what water there is leads to frequent political difficulties which at times end in armed conflict. Lebanon is squarely in the fray and the problem will only get worse as growing

populations and increased urbanization of the entire region place new demands on already stressed resources.

While Lebanon itself is "well watered...with many rivers and streams," (2:47) she has had conflicts with Israel, Jordan, and Syria over water. These disputes have been based on a wide range of issues, from charges that Israel is stealing water from Lebanon's Litani River and diverting water from the River Jordan, to dam building projects designed to alter the natural flow of water. (9:12) "Hydro-politics" are played extensively by several states in the region. In fact, water is believed by some to be the true reason for occupation of Lebanese territory by both Israel and Syria. Each "depends" on water supplies that originate in Lebanon and both have found both the political rationale and the military means to exert control over this vital resource. In his article "Middle East Water: Power for Peace", John Cooley suggests that while westerners may see oil as being of primary importance in the mid east, those who live there view water in that light. (10:2)

### Stateless Nations

Probably the very best example of a stateless nation in the world today is the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Not coincidentally, it and the displaced Palenstinians which are the reason for its existence,



represent Lebanon's most serious external political problem. Like many issues involving Lebanon, this one too has a decidedly "east-west" bent.

Following World War 1, Palestine fell under British rule, or mandate. At approximately the same time Britain and France signed a secret agreement concerning the independence of various Arab states. In addition to partitioning Arab lands that had been under Ottoman rule, these "arrangements" also promised a Jewish homeland in Palestine. These plans were codified in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration respectively. (9:1)

Britain's initial plan was for the Jewish and Palestinian peoples to peacefully coexist in what was then called Palestine, but what we now know as Israel. Although not without serious Arab opposition in general and strong Palestinian demands to prevent a Jewish takeover of their lands in particular, this arrangement existed for two and a half decades. In the early 1940s, however, Britain withdrew from the region, giving up her intentions of retaining Palestine as a protectorate. By then hundreds of thousands of Jews had settled in the area.

Shortly before the issues in a late-1947 UN proposal to divide the territory between the Arab and Jewish population could be resolved, the latter severed all ties with the

Palestinians and declared themselves a separate and distinct nation - Israel. (11:168) Many Palestinians fled from land which had been theirs for generations. They went by the tens of thousands to neighboring countries. Many found their way to Lebanon, particularly southern Lebanon, where they were essentially rounded up and placed into camps, some of which still exist today to house Palestinian "refugees".

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 was, of course, accomplished almost completely at the expense of Arab Palestinians. The entire region has been in turmoil ever since and Lebanon has been near the very center of that turmoil, especially since the mid 1970s. This is due to several factors: its geographical location, sandwiched as it is between Syria and Israel; its acceptance by the mid-1970s of hundreds of thousands of "displaced" Palestinians (11:185) and support for (or at least tolerance of) the militant political activist groups such as Yasser Arafat's PLO that they fostered; its "westward" leaning on some issues, and "eastward" leaning on others; and its central government which was not strong enough to keep other nations from turning it into the main political battleground for what we now call the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Several Arab countries in the region steadfastly refused to accept Israel as a legitimate state. They actively

sought its destruction and the return of Palestine to the Palestinians. To this end, they channeled money, military forces and equipment, terrorism, and other forms of influence into various sections of Lebanon. Along these same lines, recent news accounts charge non-Arab Iran with funding and directing the activities of Hizballah, a fundamentalist Islamic group operating within Lebanon. The net effect of all this is that over the years Lebanon has been turned into a convenient base of operations against the Zionists. To some extent, many of these strong anti-Jewish attitudes have remained unchanged over the past 45 years.

To protect itself Israel has reacted militarily numerous times with attacks into Lebanon to strike at real or perceived threats. In fact, Israel has for years occupied Lebanese territory as a "buffer", or "security zone" in the southern most portion of that country. The unfortunate fact is the Palestinian problem is a root cause of difficulties between Arabs and Israelis, between "east" and "west." Until that political problem is resolved, Lebanon is likely to remain, seemingly as always, caught in the middle.

Historian John Christopher reminds us that, "...Lebanon belongs to the Arab League and shares with other Arab states the problems raised by the existence of Israel and the

presence...of Palestinian refugees." (5:156) When all else is said and done, it must be remembered that Lebanon is a Middle Eastern Arab state with a large Moslem population. That, in a nutshell, explains many of modern day Lebanon's problems.

### Occupied Lands

Lebanon does not seek to occupy others' land. Her problem, in fact, is quite the reverse. Throughout history she has been unable to prevent others countries from violating her boundaries. Joseph Churba contends that Lebanese territory has been converted by others into a "springboard for the conduct of unconventional war against Israel." (12:120) Because of her almost unique nature as "bridge" between east and west, Lebanon has been at the heart of conflict and change in the entire middle east region. Her fragmented society and corresponding weak central government have allowed others to use her as a pawn in the wider Arab-Israeli conflict.

For years Syria maintained a large force in Lebanon. Although billed as peace making and then peace keeping, some considered it just short of occupation. In any case, the Syrian Army was instrumental in eventually making Lebanon more pliable in the hands of Syrian government leaders. Furthermore, Israel is said to have made literally hundreds

of border crossings into southern Lebanon in retaliation for terrorist attacks launched from that area. On at least two occasions these Israeli crossings turned into much more. In 1978 and again in 1982, major Israeli air and ground forces pushed deep into Lebanon, at one point reaching all the way to Beirut. These incursions were ostensibly to enhance Israeli security by punishing those who threatened it by terrorist activity. These strikes were primarily aimed at PLO strongholds. (11:270 and 280-282) When cease fire agreements were reached and troops were withdrawn, Israel retained a "protective" zone.

Lebanon's primary territorial dispute today involves the Israeli occupation of a 10-12 mile deep swath along her southern border. The Israelis consider this a buffer zone against attacks into northern Israel by terrorist groups staging from southern Lebanon. There are some who also believe that Israel occupies this territory as an additional "tripwire" against a possible Syrian invasion. For the time being, this situation continues to exist because of Israeli intransigence and Lebanon's inability to force a withdrawal.

Interestingly, Lebanon's southern border has recently been "moved" northward again to create a "no mans land" for the 415 Palestinians deported by Israel last December. This is probably a temporary redrawing of boundary lines designed only to put political pressure on Israel. By refusing to

accept the deportees into "Lebanon proper," that country's Arab faction is playing a powerful trump card in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Since the deported Palestinians also happen to be Moslem, the problem becomes even broader in scope, having both political and religious ramifications.

#### Haves/Have Nots

In the category of "haves vs have nots," Lebanon fits mostly into the latter. This is so primarily because of the limited natural resources in the country. Certainly critical to today's definition of wealth, particularly in the middle east, is oil. Lebanon has none. Tourism, once a booming business, has all but dried up over the past twenty years because of terrorism and factional military conflicts. The country produces relatively few goods of its own for export and its ports, previously among the best in the region, were closed or severely damaged during the civil war along with a great deal of other economic infrastructure. The civil war cost was huge: GDP, for example, slipped from a pre-war high of \$3.5 billion in 1974 to \$1.8 billion by 1985. (2:93 and 7:572) Historically, Lebanon has relied heavily on geography and a "service" orientation, rather than on natural resources, as the foundation for whatever economic strength she enjoyed.

As the originating point for many water routes that were established centuries ago for the conduct of worldwide commerce, Lebanon has long served as the "middleman" or "conduit" for trade between other middle eastern countries and the rest of the world. This, over time, has afforded some degree of prosperity to the people of Lebanon. In fact, during the 1950s and 60s, Lebanon was one of the most prosperous of all middle eastern states, excluding those with oil producing capabilities. Unfortunately, the fifteen year civil war extensively damaged the country's economic infrastructure. This, combined with reductions in aid from both the U.S. and some of the oil rich nations in the region, has had a disastrous impact on Lebanon's economic health.

It has been estimated for example that approximately \$2.5 billion will be needed just to provide adequate housing for those displaced during the war (8:1991-14), and that repairing damaged infrastructure could cost upwards of \$30 billion (13:126/U.S. State Department estimate). Other reports indicate roughly 25 percent of the country's productive capacity disappeared during the civil war and inflation was recently charted at over 150 percent per year. To complicate things further, the value of the Lebanese pound against the U.S. dollar plummeted from 5.9 to 1 in the mid-1980s to 668 to 1 in 1990. (1:1 and 14:80) Such conditions lead to anything but prosperity.

### Military Forces and Imbalances

In 1990 the military situation in Lebanon was as fragmented as her religious sects. The "national" military, small and factionalized like the country itself, consisted of only slightly more than 20,000 troops. However, there were also three private armies, at least 22 militias, 40,000 Syrian "peace makers", an 11-nation UN force of "peace keepers", approximately 1,000 Israeli troops along the southern border, an additional Israeli "proxy" army of nearly 2,500, and thousands of armed Palestinians. (15:19 and 8:3) This chaotic military arrangement was largely responsible for the cessation of U.S. aid to Lebanon in the late 1980s.

In 1991 the central government, bolstered somewhat by the end of the civil war, began a program to disband the sectarian militias. Thousands of the previous "freedom fighters" were integrated into the Lebanese military structure. The "foreign" armies, however, are still present and continue to create instability by their very presence. (16:675) The largest of these, the Syrians, initially entered the country ostensibly to help stabilize the situation during Lebanon's long civil war. Over the years the Syrian Army in Lebanon grew to roughly 40,000 personnel. It remained as a dominating force and apparently with U.S.



acquiescence, took near total control of Lebanese governmental processes. (15:19-20)

Because the multiple separate armies have existed for so long, estimates of forces and weapons in the country "... can vary by as much as a factor of 10 even in well-informed intelligence assessments," according to one study, which goes on to say "...no estimate of Lebanese strengths, regardless of source, should be considered either authoritative or enduring." (7:575) It is, however, probably fair to say that Lebanon itself does not pose a serious military threat to any other country in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Lebanon has long been a country of extremes. In recent times at the height of its political and religious divisions, the entire country has become a virtual war zone. The events of the past twenty years in particular will ensure words like 'fanatical', 'bomb', 'terrorist', 'hostage', and 'unrelenting bloodshed' will be used by writers as they document this period of Lebanon's history. Few countries in the world can match either the intensity or the duration of such sustained levels of turmoil. Fortunately, many have watched these events unfold on the world stage and some now appear interested in preventing the "Lebanonization" of their society and country.

The problems Lebanon faces have existed for many years. They are grounded in long-standing cultural and religious differences that do not lend themselves to easy solution. Current thinking seems to be that significant healing will not begin until the Palestinian homeland issue is resolved. This may be more easily achieved now that the Former Soviet Union has dissolved. The political and military backing of some of the belligerents simply no longer exists. Creating circumstances that improve the possibility of settling the Palestinian question is, to me, the major challenge for U.S. foreign policy makers. The benefits of success would be positive and immediate, not only in Lebanon but throughout the entire Middle Eastern region of the world.

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